

Leading participatory community engagement

Joining me today are Laura Pye,
Head of Culture at Bristol Culture
and David Anderson, Director General
of National Museums Wales.

We're here to talk about
the leadership of organisations
that seek to work in participatory ways with their communities.

Of course, when we talk about participation,
we're talking about much more than visiting museums.

We're talking about ways of sharing power,
sharing the decision making in all sorts of ways.

David, your staff and Paul Hamlyn talk about your passion.

How important do you think it is
to demonstrate a passion for this work?

I probably sometimes show
too much passion I would guess.

I think it's... well it becomes...

It comes, essentially, from what I believe museums should be
and there's been ongoing debates
over decades within the cultural sector
and within the museum sector about the role of audiences.

And traditionally, there's been one strand
of thought anyway which is that, essentially,
knowledge lies within the organisation
and the job is to disseminate
that knowledge, through exhibits
and programmes and so on,
to an audience that carries very little knowledge.

And I really fundamentally disagree
with that philosophy and always have done.
So perhaps the passion comes from decades
of needing to argue the case.

Laura, when you arrived at Bristol Culture
staff noticed how keen you were
to engage with community partners,

even offering to come, which they felt
sent a really positive message
both to the staff and to the partners.
Why was that important?
I think, from my point of view,
it's about that leading by example thing
and me showing that I wish to be engaged
with those communities and, therefore, the staff
need to be engaged with those communities
so it's about being involved with the communities;
making sure that I'm seen
at the meetings, making sure that I go
and attend events on their patch
and I attend things that are important to them
as well as just expecting them to do stuff in the museum.
It's key that the external partners
see you there because it gives them confidence
that the staff that they're working with
have got support through the organisation as well.
Yes, I mean I'd agree, I think that's really key
that presence in meetings with community hub partners
and things like that certainly gives it a degree of gravitas,
even if quite often I would attend meetings
for the first 20 minutes because that was all of the time I had.
But I always made sure that I had 20 minutes
to be in the room and say hello
and show that I was committed
and continuing to doing it.
And I think, as well for me,
it's important that I respond,
so it's important they get a personal...
people get a personal response from me.
If they email me, whilst I will quite often pass it
on to somebody else who is better skilled
to answer their question,
they'll always get a response from me

so that they know that it was important to me
that they got an answer.

I think it's important for me as Director
to set the strategic direction
after engaging our own trustees
and engaging the staff in the discussion.

Inevitably, there will be some staff
who will question that and they're entitled to do so
and there's a rigour that comes from that
but equally, on occasion, I have to say,
"This is where we're going."

And in the presentations
that I would do to staff about our work
to try to make sure there were examples
of participatory projects included among them.
So there was profile for it as well.

What tips do you have
for making participation everyone's job?

Within our service it's within
everybody's job descriptions now
so everybody has a line in their job description
around engagement and participation.

But that, in itself, probably isn't enough
and we've also put in new processes
to ensure that that engagement
or participation is happening.

So for example, anyone who proposes an exhibition
to happen in any of our sites one of the initial forms
is what consultation have they done
with community groups
and how will communities be engaged?

So we can check that through our processes
to make sure everybody's aware.

It's something that we value
and something that we need to happen.

And one significant change

we've changed the structure
of the organisation and, within the structure,
we've given much higher priority to this kind of work.
And trying to make sure that it's not seen
just as the traditional work
of an education department if you like,
but that, actually, it's something that curators
can and do make a fantastic contribution to.
You know, to take one more example of educators.
In other words it's an organisation wide programme.

What are the business models
around participatory community engagement?

I think, for us, we did a lot of work
in restructuring the team when I started
and we've restructured the team
to put resource and to put staff into roles
so that we can engage with more people
and different communities.

And making that a focus.

And we have to be a museum first
and part of our core purpose as a museum
is engaging with our local communities.

One of the key things we did was to...
we had to do, was to do a re-visioning
of the organisation and identify, you know,
what our real priorities were
and we decided that participation inclusion
was one of the central purposes
of the whole organisation
and, therefore, part of the work
of every member of staff.

Like virtually every public sector
organisation, we're experiencing significant budget cuts
and because we have a new vision
we're able to set resources
against the participation inclusion strand

of our vision work. So I think in that way,
we are now beginning to allocate resources
against participation and inclusion
in a way that might have been difficult
with the vision statements that we'd had in the past.
And it does link planning with purpose perhaps very directly.
How do we finance it?

There is often external funding
to support community participation work;
whether from commercial sources
or trust and foundations or public sources.
but it's vital that we don't rely upon that
to deliver these services.

On the contrary, it's vital that we say
that they're central to our work
and we then look to where we can get
the resources to do them.

For us, we finance it and manage it
across the team as a whole
so we manage our budgets
across the whole of the culture team.

We don't, you know, separate bits out.

Parts of our business costs us money
and parts of our business makes us money.

But we don't think, "Well, we've made some money here
so we're going to put it here", necessarily.

We have vision for what we want to achieve in the year.

We know what that's going to cost us
and we balance our budgets
across the whole service.

I think that it's vital that participation
is seen as key to the future
of very, very many museums.

There will be some museums
which will continue to be extremely well funded
through private sources as well as public.

They will be the minority.

For all the rest of us to step back from the relationships

with the communities,

the civic centres and, in our case,

the nation, who we are here to serve,

and to think that it's possible

to dispose of this way of working as non-essential,

I think, in the long-term,

will be strategic suicide.

These are really, really hard times.

The game has changed and the museums

have to be as professional in this work as they possibly can.

It's our future.